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Symposium

Editorial policies, "public domain," and acafandom

Francesca Musiani

Centre de Sociologie de l'Innovation, MINES ParisTech, Paris, France

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1. Introduction

[1.1] "The burden of what we share in public is on us," write Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (2009), editors of the online-only fan studies journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC), in an essay outlining the journal's editorial philosophy and its conception of fan privacy and the stance of academics in fan studies. This statement directly addresses fans' responsibility to consider their privacy when they publish their work on the Internet, but it equally describes what acafans ought to keep in mind whenever they quote or cite fan publications.

[1.2] An acafan by accident (note 1) and author of a recent article for TWC (Musiani 2010), I have found myself, at various stages of the publishing process, reflecting on the broader implications, for my double status of fan and researcher into fandom, of TWC's peculiar editorial requirements and policies. These policies stimulate questions about acafandom's very nature, and about the ways in which, as a set of research and publication practices, it experiments with ethics and relationships to the research subjects. I present here some reflections on this topic, revolving around three main questions: What are the innovations at work in the editorial policies of scholarly outlets, such as TWC, that are overtly aimed at acafans? What reconfigurations of the public domain, as it is commonly understood by academics, do they suggest? And what definition of privacy does this conception of academic publishing entail, both for the fan as a research subject and for the acafan herself?

2. Defining acafandom with editorial policies

[2.1] The acafandom label has recently emerged in scholarly debates in the field of fan studies as a way to reconcile academic interest and "immersion in the…subject matter…[It represents] an effort to position the author within the center of the debate and to elevate different tastes within the field of media studies" (Tait 2010). As fan studies is shaping and stabilizing itself as a field or subfield in its own right, Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc point out that new challenges emerge for cultural critics who are both insiders and outsiders to their research subject. The most notable of these challenges is to find a way to write about "multiple (and often contradictory) involvements, participations, engagements, and identifications with popular culture—without denying, rationalizing, and distorting them" (Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc 2002, 7).

[2.2] As shown by a recent special issue of the online fan studies publication *Flow,* "Revisiting Aca-Fandom," the debate on acafandom is currently very lively, questioning the label's usefulness as a theoretical trope, its agency as an instrument for privileging or neglecting specific tastes and topics, and its relationship with scholars' supposed obligation to reveal their emotional attachment to their research subject in case it unduly affects their positions, their likes and dislikes, or their scientific and critical distance (Tait 2010). Pointing out that thoughtful academic study of any subject requires a very deep level of engagement with the material and time-consuming dedication, Catherine Coker and Candace Benefiel (2010) interestingly reverse acafandom's most frequently asked question: "The question…is not whether the engagement of an acafan is appropriate in the study of cultural production, but how can the critical study of any text succeed without the passionate and knowledgeable participation of the scholar?" According to Jen Gunnels and Flourish Klink (2010), the key to the acafandom debate is to acknowledge the centrality of the question of participation "in and through the body," as fandom is a performed set of practices; it is "something that one *does.*" Her approach is reminiscent of Antoine Hennion's pragmatics of taste, which he sees as a means to put "reflexivity on the side of the amateurs and not only on that of sociologists concerned not to bias their analyses" (2009, 55). Paul Booth (2010) notes that "fandom is a universal practice invoking appropriation" and that "by looking at fans, we as academics inherently validate fandom as an area of study," only to ask, "What, then, is it precisely that we validate?" With this article, I intend to add a further dimension to the debate on acafandom, discussing how it contributes to the reshaping of its own label.

[2.3] As often happens, my own venture into the realm of fan studies was the result of my being a member of a fan community and wanting to let the world know about some features of it that I considered important and neglected. After inviting me to take a wonderful journey with *Earth 2*'s colonists, how dared CBS let the series end on a cliffhanger and not tell me whether Devon Adair, the main character and my personal favorite, would overcome the mysterious ailment that had forced her companions to put her into hibernation, in the hope of gaining time to find a cure? On the other hand, as a social scientist by training, I felt naturally inclined to approach the subject from an academic perspective, both in the types of questions I asked and in the ways I answered them. What happens when fans of a canceled series want more of it? How does the ending of a series influence the subsequent creative writing about that series? When fans fill in gaps in a series by writing fan fiction for it, what needs are they fulfilling? (Musiani 2010). TWC was founded in 2008 with the ambition to publish "articles about transformative works, broadly conceived; articles about media studies; and articles about the fan community" (http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc), and to me, a newcomer to the field of fan studies, it appeared the ideal venue for my work.

[2.4] While I was going through peer review and the prepublication process, I was directed by the journals' editors to an essay they had written for the Organization for Transformative Works: "Fan Privacy and TWC's Editorial Philosophy" (Hellekson and Busse 2009). The more I pondered it, the more I found myself thinking that the essay, in addition to outlining the rationale for the journal's editorial policies, was also proposing a conceptualization of acafandom by defining the right ways of doing things for an academic in the field of fan studies, and was doing so by reconfiguring the rules of engagement in what is commonly considered one of academia's essential practices: publication.

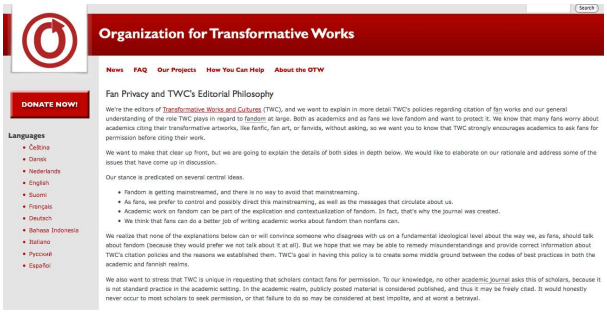

Figure 1. *Author guidelines or editorial philosophy? (Screencap, http://transformativeworks.org/projects/twc-citation.) [View larger image.]*

3. The fannishness of academics and the humanness of fan subjects

[3.1] TWC's "strong encouragement" to contributors is, at a first glance, simple. Its editors want academics to ask fans for permission before citing their work (e.g., fan fiction, art, and videos) that is posted on Web sites or in online communities that are, formally, freely accessible and open to any Internet user. What is less simple is the rationale behind it, and what it means for an academic to adopt this policy. There are a number of things at stake here.

[3.2] First, the call for a "good-faith effort" (Hellekson and Busse 2009) to secure fan consent has implications for the researcher's stance toward the research subject; it reshapes the boundaries between the two. Indeed, in this respect, acafan research ethics appear to be closely intertwined with feminist research practices; most notably, they are reminiscent of feminist scholars' rejection of the artificial separation between the researcher and the researched, as well as the notion that such a separation produces more valid results (Sarantakos 2004). The editors of TWC, like feminist scholars, advocate a dialectical relationship between the subject and object of research, a form of participatory research, and a "conscious partiality": the "researcher's understanding of the connectedness to the experiences of the research subject through partial identification" (Cook and Fonow 1990, 79).

[3.3] Second, the editorial policy also specifically addresses fandom as distinct from other communities that are placed under the lens of the social sciences, fans as distinct from other "human subjects" in research, and fan studies scholars as distinct from other academics. "In the academic realm, publicly posted material is considered published, and thus it may be freely cited," but TWC's editors require academics to deviate from this standard and ask permission to cite fannish material, arguing that this practice is better suited to a world in which fandom is increasingly mainstream and where "many fans worry about academics citing their transformative artworks, like fanfic, fan art, or fanvids, without asking" (Hellekson and Busse 2009). For a scholar, therefore, practicing acafandom means revisiting her concept of "public domain" and her habit of freely citing creative works published on the Internet (Templeton 2008), keeping in mind what, as a fan, she would consider public, semipublic, and private; as Kristina Busse points out, "the dilemma that online researchers have to confront is how to respect a user's or group's perceived privacy while simultaneously not ignoring their voices" (Busse 2009).

Figure 2. *Rethinking the public domain (http://rights.jinbo.net/english/images/public-domain.jpg). [View larger image.]*

[3.4] Third, the editorial policy suggests that academics in the field of fan studies should treat artifacts and texts found online (images, stories, videos) as if they were human subjects, subjecting their work to the stricter institutional monitoring reserved for research using people. This seems odd in academic settings in which online content is generally considered as discourse and text, and can be sampled, analyzed, and interpreted as such. Yet TWC's editors are suggesting that the dichotomy between representations and people (White n.d.) is a particularly unsatisfactory guiding principle in certain research contexts, such as qualitative research into fan communities by people who are members of that fan community. In such contexts, the boundaries between the observer and the observed are constantly evolving and ceaselessly redefined.

[3.5] Finally, the policy suggests that the acafan should feel bound by the community norms of both academics and fans, not just by those of academia. The acafan certainly has privileged access to the terrain of fandom, inflected by her personal tastes, and is thus more likely than a random observer to be able to grasp all the complexities and nuances of fan communities. Therefore, she is likely to do a better job as a scientist. But with this privilege also comes an additional ethical requirement, which is to remain accountable to her fan community, observing its rules as carefully as those of her academic community.

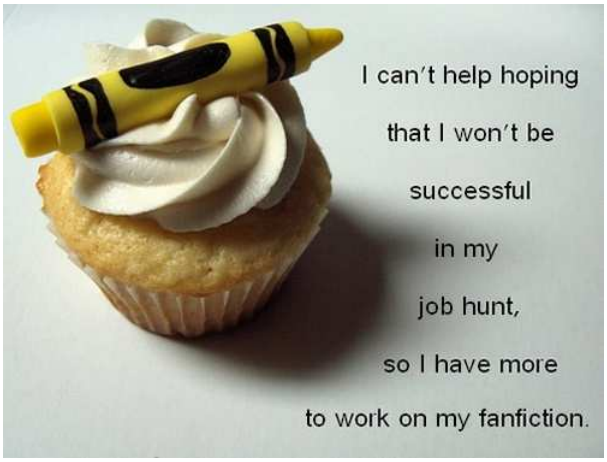

Figure 3. *Fandom Secrets (http://community.livejournal.com/fandomsecrets). [View larger image.]*

4. Conclusions: Acafandom as "fans first" research ethics?

[4.1] Is the "middle ground between the codes of best practices in both the academic and fannish realms" (Hellekson and Busse 2009) the way to go? I am still pondering the question, but I feel comfortable with one conclusion: the analysis of innovative editorial philosophies and practices such as the one proposed by *Transformative Works and Cultures* opens up new aspects of the definition of acafandom and allows us to add another layer to the mainstream conception of it as an interweaving of intellectual and emotional engagements (Jenkins n.d.), which fan scholars have no choice but to either embrace or resist (Bogost 2010). Indeed, these recent experiments suggest that acafandom may be defined by research ethics that put fans first—not only because fannishness is a part of the scholar's personality and thus the scholar's tastes vis-à-vis the objects of study become relevant, but also, and maybe more importantly, because fans are themselves coproducers of amateur academic reflections on fan cultures (Hennion, Maisonneuve, and Gomart 2000).

[4.2] TWC's attempt at a hybrid editorial policy, melding fandom and academic rigor, gave the researcher in me new food for thought. It suggested that I consider how fandoms are particularly delicate research fields, not only because the researcher wears two hats as fan and scholar but also, and perhaps even more, because the two hats tend to superpose and blend; because to the publicity of scholarly sources acafandom adds the publicity, or semipublicity, or privacy, of fans' confessions, sharing, and musings; because acafandom questions and redefines the dichotomy of text and human subject, in both the observer and the observed; and, finally, because the policy asks

scholars to be accountable to a double set of rules and enriches ethical research guidelines with new questions, if not (yet?) with new answers.

[4.3] While I was elaborating these rather scholarly musings, the fan in me was negotiating her fannish identity and her attachment to her fandom subject. I remembered how, one hot August in 1998, the teenage me had stared in disbelief at the end credits of the last episode of *Earth 2,* realizing that the intriguing and distressing cliffhanger would be the ending point of the series. I also remembered that my *Earth 2* article for TWC was originally a final paper for a graduate course, and its first draft contained a prelude in which I was confessing, even excusing, the effects of that teenager's fannish musings on me, now an older fan, and on my choice to use the *Earth 2* fan base as a case study in my research on Internet-based participatory practices. When I was first told that no such apologetic confession was necessary if the article was to be published in TWC, I was startled and slightly annoyed. Now, after several negotiations with my fannish identity and my research methods, I not only realize that it was unnecessary but understand that it would have been inappropriate to include it.

[4.4] Does this mean I am a bona fide acafan now? Maybe; more likely, there is no single answer to the question. But one thing is sure: my TWC experience has opened up new paths of reflection on the importance of fans as both human subjects and creators. It has suggested that instead of being a privilege bestowed on fans by the researcher, this double significance can be a discreet, yet ever-present and deeply internalized, part of her methodology. This theoretical and empirical positioning, more perhaps than the extent of her preferences and emotional involvement in her subject of study, should be the trademark of a researcher able to both deal with the fan in the academic, and bring out the academic in the fan.

5. Acknowledgment

[5.1] Thanks to Philipp Schmerheim for his remarks and feedback on the first draft of this piece, and, as usual, for the great conversations on how to study fans while being one.

6. Note

1. Labeling myself an "acafan by accident" is not an attempt to distance myself from the acafan identity. I use the label to indicate that I became interested in the series as a fan first, and only later asked research questions

about it; my research was usually on other topics. More specifically, the word *accident* means that I chose to investigate a particular TV series not because it suited my needs for a scholarly case study, but because I liked it as a fan and was at the same time inclined to have an academic perspective on it because of my personality and profession.

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